BAPE - Phase 3 Submissions
Chisasibi, November 11
James Bobbish

Wachiya, and welcome to Chisasibi.

My name is James Bobbish. I am a former chief of Chisasibi. I am here today to make this submission on behalf of the Grand Council of the Crees of Eeyou Istchee.

It is fitting that the BAPE is beginning its third phase of hearings in Eeyou Istchee, where much of the debate around uranium development in Quebec began. It is also fitting that the BAPE is beginning these hearings in the Cree Nation of Chisasibi, where the people know first-hand the effects of development in Eeyou Istchee.

As is widely known, the Cree Nation of Chisasibi has not always been situated here, where it is today. This community used to be located on the island of Fort George, at the mouth of the La Grande River. When the Province of Quebec and Hydro-Quebec planned their massive hydro-electric project, they did not care that a community would have to be relocated, that people would lose their homes, that our sacred burial grounds and family traplines would be flooded and lost forever. They didn't worry about the Crees.

Our leaders fought hard against the hydro project, but the government wouldn't change its plan. The bulldozers were coming to our territory, regardless of our opposition. Our leaders negotiated the best deal that they

could, given the circumstances. They negotiated the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, Canada's first modern treaty. But Chisasibi and the Cree Nation have paid a heavy price.

The river diversions that were part of the La Grande complex caused a greatly increased water flow in the river. As a result, the Fort George island is now inaccessible throughout most of the year. The community's relocation was part of the price to be paid for development.

During the Phase II hearings, I understand that certain experts reported to you that introducing development to the North has been nothing but beneficial. I understand that one so-called expert even went so far as to say that we Crees don't need to go into the bush anymore because we now have the ability to shoot animals from our trucks, on the roads. It was suggested that going into the bush to hunt was an obstacle and an inconvenience to be avoided if possible.

The so-called experts who presented these views do not understand the Crees. They do not understand that for us, our lands provide spiritual as well as physical nourishment. A lot of the diseases that our people have are related to nutrition and food from the bush provides a strong supplement for store-bought foods.

I am not denying that we have benefited in some ways from development. But we have also suffered serious, irreparable impacts which continue to this day. One such impact is the high levels of mercury that are found in

fish in parts of Eeyou Istchee. These levels are amongst the highest in Canada, and it is because of hydro-electric development on our lands.

The Eastmain and Caniapiscau Rivers were diverted as part of the La Grande hydroelectric project, and the La Grande River and its tributaries were dammed. About 12,000 square kilometres of boreal forest was submerged under the resulting reservoirs. This type of vegetation stores mercury. The mercury stored in the flooded vegetation was released into the waters. Due to the diversion of the water flow, the sudden abundance of mercury was unable to disperse. The fish in these waters now have among the highest mercury content in Canada.

Fishing and goose hunting are two of our many traditional practices – they are how our ancestors fed their families. Fish were a staple in our diet. But now, because of these high levels of mercury found in the fish, many Crees have reduced their consumption of fish from these regions. Our communities are now obliged to comply with guidelines relating to the harvesting and consumption of fish.

In terms of the fall goose hunt, the Cree of James Bay believe that the unnatural volume of water through the La Grande River contributes directly to the great decline of goose feeding habitats. This has impacted the hunting patterns of the Cree and reduced the success of our fall goose hunts.

I am raising these two issues as examples of the impact that development has had and will continue to have on our culture, our traditional practices,

and our way of life in general. It affects us. In addition to mercury contamination, we have experienced many social impacts as a result of the hydro development project. We are the ones who must live with the risks of development. We are the ones who bear the brunt of the social and environmental impacts of development on our territory.

This is why we must have a say in whether or not development projects can go forward on our land.

The Cree Nation's position is that our consent is required before natural resource development projects can take place in Eeyou Istchee. It's as simple as that. We are the ones who will be impacted by this development.

We are told that there may be positive impacts that could come out of uranium development – training and educational opportunities for our youth, jobs and economic benefits for our communities. But we know that these are short-lived compared to the risks that we will be left with when the mining companies have extracted the yellowcake, made their profits and moved on.

The truth is, there are too many unanswered questions about uranium development to be assured that our children and our children's children will not be harmed by this development. There are too many unanswered questions about uranium mining and its effects on human health, on wildlife and on the environment in general. There are too many unanswered questions to reassure us that our water supply will not become contaminated.

There are too many unanswered questions about current methods for isolating and containing uranium tailings. These tailings will pose a radiological and toxic hazard for thousands of years. There is no known method for containing tailings that can last a few hundred years, let alone for a few thousand. There are too many unanswered questions to reassure us that our communities and our land will be safe from a leak or a spill.

And it's not just that we haven't heard answers to our questions about uranium. It's that no one can answer these questions. The experts do not have enough information. The experts do not have enough experience. So how can we as a community accept the risks associated with uranium development, when we don't even know enough to know what exactly those risks are and how our community will be impacted by them?

Because that's what social acceptability is. It is about a community accepting the risks – all of the risks – associated with a particular form of development. It is about a community weighing the benefits of development against the risks, and deciding that the benefits outweigh the risks. It's about a community freely choosing to go forward with development despite those risks.

That is why it is the community that bears the risks that must have a say. That is why that say is key. And we the Cree Nation say no to the exploration and mining of uranium.